

Bombs in a National Park: Military Use of Hawaii National Park During World War II

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Late in 1938, the Army Air Corps decided it needed a bombing range in Hawaii and, after reviewing "all possible areas" in the Territory of Hawaii, they decided that a location on the Ka'u coast of the Hawaii National Park was the "only suitable site." The park site, they insisted, met all their needs.¹

The park site, however, had been set aside by Act of Congress to preserve its natural features unimpaired for public use. Utilization of the park area for this intended military use would necessitate its withdrawal from public use as the two uses were not compatible. Military use, furthermore, was in conflict with the Act of 1916 which established the park. Such Army use, and the necessary withdrawal of land from the park, would establish a precedent difficult to control and dangerous to the whole park system.²

Hawaii National Park Superintendent Edward Wingate, meeting with the military in November 1938, indicated he would not object to an application from the Army for use of the area for a specified time, with no permanent structures, and after every effort had been made to locate a suitable range outside the park.³ The Army, however, had already selected the site they wanted. They applied for use of nine square miles of Ka'u seacoast the following April.

In response to a wire from Regional Director Arthur E. Demaray,⁴ Wingate reported his November 1938 meeting with the military, and indicated the Army had not looked for other areas, such as the uninhabited desert site at Manuka which was available. Furthermore, during their meeting with him in 1938, they had talked of seven square miles, not the nine they were now requesting. He recommended that no more than six miles be made available and that this be done after the Army had explained what other sites they had investigated, and why those were unavailable. He also urged that any withdrawal of park lands not be effected until the Territory had taken the necessary steps toward transferring the Kalapana extension lands to the park.⁵

The Army persisted and on May 29, 1939 the Secretary of the Interior wrote the Secretary of War that "if you say" this is the only suitable site, Interior would make no administrative objections.⁶ This use of the area,

however, per provisions of the Act of 1916, would require that it be "eliminated" from Hawaii National Park by Congressional action. The War Department felt it had the necessary legislative support and a bill was introduced by Texas Senator Morris Sheppard in spring 1940 for the larger area of 9 square miles, nearly 6450 acres, plus a number of park roads and trails, and the scenic Hilina Pali cliffs, to be known as the Na Puu O Na Elemakule Range.⁷

The bill set off a flurry of protests from conservation minded groups and individuals whose complaints were much the same as Wingate's: the area had been set aside in perpetuity and this withdrawal set a dangerous precedent. Typical were the comments of Richard W. Westwood, managing editor of *Nature* magazine: In view of the present European situation, he wrote, Congress will pass "anything that seems to have military significance . . . without consideration of the consequences. With all the terrific destruction going on in the world today, the still small voice of conservation is going to have a more and more difficult time making itself heard."⁸

The bill was eventually amended to the smaller area of 3052 acres, and General Charles D. Herron, Commanding General of the Hawaiian Department, agreed to the inclusion of the same terms as found in other similar agreements: that with non-use or abandonment the area would revert to its previous owner. The withdrawal was effected on July 16, 1940.

On December 4, 1940 Wingate notified the Director of the National Park Service of the additional sites the Army proposed to use on Mauna Loa and Haleakala, both within Hawaii National Park, and in September 1941, forwarded a new series of complaints from conservation minded citizens protesting a bombing range in the park, especially as recent rumor had it the Army had since acquired lands for an additional range near South Point.⁹

The Army Air Corps had its necessary bombing range in mid-1940; World War II began in December 1941, nearly 18 months later.¹⁰ Yet, except for a brief period in 1943 when the Navy did some practice bombing, the military did not use this 3052 acres they had arranged to withdraw from a National Park. The Army did not use it at all. In fact, little is heard of the bombing range until March 25, 1945 when a plane strafed the area around Apua Point and slightly injured two fishermen.¹¹ Protests to the Army brought disclaimers that they had anything to do with it, that it must have been Navy planes. A Col. Muller also sent a brisk memo to Navy officials to the effect that they were to "eliminate this hazard."¹² In December 1945, the Army formally relinquished a separate area of two acres at Apua Point, but did not mention the Elemakule bombing range.¹³

The following spring, Acting Superintendent Paul Baldwin wrote to ask if it wasn't about time to reopen the Ka'u question. Before retiring, Superintendent Wingate had indicated he felt there was no need for congressional action, as Congress had left the precise area of the withdrawal to be decided between the Interior and War Departments. Baldwin noted the area had never been used by the Army and if they were giving it up, it should go back to the National Park Service, not to the Navy.¹⁴ The area was a goat patrol problem

for the park, but access for goat drives had been refused and when park personnel were allowed in at all, they were fired upon.¹⁵ Secretary of the Interior Julius A. Krug agreed, and on April 23, 1945 invited the Secretary of War to join in sponsoring legislation for its return.¹⁶ War, however, wanted "a study" of this joint legislation and the matter faded from view until April 1948, when the Army reported it could foresee no use for the area and would not object to legislation authorizing its return to the National Park Service. In June 1947, Service administration asked for a list of war-use-permits scheduled to have expired six months after duration, that is, no later than March 1946, which showed two Haleakala sites, Kilauea Military Camp, and the Ka'u Bombing Range still in military hands.¹⁷

On September 30, 1948 the area was again used for bombing, with no prior warning. A request to the Air Force for an explanation brought a surprised reply from the Army Air Commanding Officer at Hickam who again disclaimed responsibility but reported that the Navy had posted a newspaper notice of possible use.¹⁸ General Travis followed this with a memo dated October 5, 1948 saying that there would be no more bombing there "under any circumstances" as there were other adequate ranges elsewhere. On the other hand, he also promised advance notification should an "unsettled situation" require use of the area.¹⁹

Although the Army no longer needed it, the Navy now seemed to. The local park staff urged immediate legislation to return the lands to the National Park Service, if necessary asking the Army Air Force to sponsor such legislation. Such a bill was proposed for introduction to the 81st Congress but apparently nothing came of it.²⁰ The Army did undertake to clear unexploded projectiles and then restore the Ka'u Desert Impact and Training Area, also within the park. It is not known if they also cleared the bombing range.²¹ Finally, in May 1950²² the Secretary of War and Secretary of the Interior agreed on revoking the order of withdrawal. This was accomplished June 14, 1950.

Although the Elemakule Bombing Range received light use, the park did not escape unscathed. Immediately after December 7, 1941 the 27th division under General Ralph Pennell moved into the park and took over several buildings and other facilities. Although on their departure in October 1942 several small tools had disappeared, some expensive glassware had been broken and a tractor-grader had been damaged (repaired eventually by the Army Engineers), their commanding officer had cooperated fully in protecting the park.²³

Shortly after their departure, however, a "bothersome problem" arose through use of the park by various Army units for motorized and infantry maneuvers and firing practice without reference to the park administration. Wingate's Report to the Director for the fiscal year 1943 is a masterpiece of understatement in reporting this invasion. This use, he reported, was doing extensive damage to the forests and desert terrain and was observed carefully for some time before the matter was taken up with the new commander. The best that could be gotten from these negotiations was the latter's approval of a tentative agreement to confine the Army activity to a specified area on certain

days each week, and the assurance that as rapidly as possible this use would be lessened and if possible discontinued. Though this tentative agreement could not be approved by the Service officially, it was reasonably adhered to locally, although it had been necessary to call the General's attention to violations of the agreement that he had put in the form of an order to personnel under his command. The assignment of a range officer at nearby Kilauea Military Camp to control Army activity helped, but the roads were still deteriorating badly, minimum restoration cost of damaged areas was already over \$50,000 and some sections could never be restored. So long, wrote Wingate, as Martial Law remains in effect no further alleviation can be expected, except possibly through a change in local commanders, since the Army has authority under this law to do whatever it deems necessary to promote the progress of the war.²⁴

Regional Director Owen A. Tomlinsom had long since sent Wingate's reports on to the Director, with the notation that Army use of the area was a mere convenience, but not a necessity, and the Secretary of War could, if he wanted, issue blanket instructions in respect to park areas.²⁵ At the very least, training in the park should be limited to Territorial defense needs.

The Martial Law aspect, however, made it futile to forbid Army use and even with the tentative agreement, Wingate had an uphill fight to preserve park values. He was in regular correspondence with General Herbert D. Gibson, Commanding Officer of the Hawaiian Department, on many violations of the agreement in respect to: the area to be used (expanded at will beyond the original agreement); the degree of damage (Gibson felt it was minimal, but in April Wingate was protesting wilfull damage with restoration costs of over \$100,000 in an area set aside and dedicated "by Congress as a public park and pleasure ground for all people");²⁶ and unnecessary hazards and harassment (trip wires across both patrol and public trails, with no warning of their installation; permission to clear the road of boulders in preparation of an eruption, which included explicit instructions that each boulder was to be placed just off the edge of the road clear of the shoulder "to a position directly opposite the one it now occupies.") He also asked that the entire operation be moved to available private land.²⁷

The protests eventually reached the Departmental level and on January 30, 1944 Interior Secretary Abe Fortas wrote the War Department that there was no debate on the use of the Ka'u Reservation (the bombing range), but there was a definite protest on the use of unauthorized areas in the park referred to informally as the Ka'u Desert Impact and Training Area.²⁸ Specifically, Interior wanted the Army to withdraw from the latter area. On November 27, 1944 Secretary Fortas tried again, pointing out that for two years, with no permit, the Army had been using the Ka'u area of Hawaii National Park with resulting heavy damage.²⁹ Martial Law had been terminated in the Territory on October 24, 1944 and there was no longer any need to train men, even for Territorial defense, in a National Park.³⁰ He again asked the Secretary of War to instruct the Army to withdraw from the area and restore it to its original condition.

In January 1945 the Army finally discontinued their unauthorized use of

the Ka'u Desert area for training purposes and maneuvers, which had involved both heavy and light weapons, although they retained warning signs for months after that.³¹

That April, Wingate was still having to explain, this time to a Major Bryan, that "at no time was permission requested to make use of park lands for these activities and none was ever given since this office and the Park Service is without authority under law to grant permission for activities of this nature."³²

At Army request, however, an estimate was made of the amount of work necessary to clean up the area, obliterate scars and do such restoration work as was still possible. Damage in many places was so grave as to be impossible of repair; koa groves had been blasted, nene nesting sites were gone, the intensive use of the desert had thoroughly broken the crust of the desert ash and the aesthetic values of the area had been largely destroyed for years to come, as well as its values for studies of plant invasion and successions.³³

World War II ended in August 1945. In December 1945 the Army finally relinquished one acre at the end of the Chain of Craters road;³⁴ in April 1946 they restored some of the damage done outside the Ka'u area; and in the spring of 1949, Army Engineers proposed clearing only trails and a buffer zone around trails and auto areas and leaving the other areas "unsearched". This was rejected as inadequate and between June and November, Kilauea and most of the Ka'u sections were cleared of unexploded shells by a Schofield Army Ordinance team.³⁵ The Superintendent's Report for January 1955 noted duds were still being found in the Ka'u desert. There is no mention of "restoration"; several areas show damage to this day.

NOTES

¹ Superintendent's Report to the Governor, June 1940.

² Hawaii National Park (hereafter HNP) file: 601-04. 1938, Nov. 20, Wingate memo.

³ HNP file: 601-04. 1939 April 19.

⁴ HNP file: 601. 1939 April 20.

⁵ HNP file: 601-04. 1939 April 19.

⁶ HNP file: 601-04. 1939 May 26.

⁷ HNP file: 601. 1940 April 11. Wirth to HNP.

⁸ HNP file: 601-04. 1939 clips.

⁹ HNP file: 601. Wingate to Dir, NPS.

¹⁰ HNP file: 601-04. 1946 Feb. 19. Baldwin to Dir, NPS.

¹¹ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1945 May 1.

¹² HNP file: 601-04. 1945 July 10.

¹³ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1945 Dec. 28.

¹⁴ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1946 Feb. 19. Baldwin to Dir, NPS; Superintendent's Annual Report to Director, NPS, fiscal year 1945.

¹⁵ HNP file: 601-04.

¹⁶ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1945 April 23.

¹⁷ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1947 June 18.

- ¹⁸ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1948 Oct. 1.
¹⁹ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1948 Oct. 5.
²⁰ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1948 Oct. 11.
²¹ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1949 Oct. 13, Nov. 2.
²² HNP file: 601-04.1. 1950 May.
²³ Superintendent's Annual Report to Director, NPS, fiscal year 1943.
²⁴ *Ibid.*
²⁵ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1943 March 4.
²⁶ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1943 July 6.
²⁷ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1943 Aug. 4, Dec. 1.
²⁸ HNP file: 601-04.1.
²⁹ *Ibid.*
³⁰ Superintendent's Annual Report to Director, NPS, fiscal year 1945.
³¹ Superintendent's Annual Report to Director, NPS, fiscal year 1945; Superintendent's Report to Governor, June 1945.
³² HNP file: 601-04.1. 1945 April 7.
³³ Superintendent's Annual Report to Director, NPS, fiscal year 1945.
³⁴ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1945 Dec. 28.
³⁵ HNP file: 601-04.1. 1949 March 21, Oct. 13, Nov. 8.